Mr. Miller Goes to Washington

The Power Behind the Powers

by Connecticut Walker

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What is power in Washington?

Little known but increasingly influential is the Congressional aide who advises the officeholder, tells him what questions to ask at public hearings and often drafts the bills that become law.

In the wake of Vietnam and Watergate, with the legislative branch reasserting itself over the executive, these aides—or "staffers," as they are known—are important figures in Washington.

One of the most important and certainly most impressive is William G. Miller, staff director for the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, which is investigating and trying to reform the CIA, FBI and other intelligence agencies.

A dark-eyed, soft-spoken, boyishly handsome 44-year-old, Miller works under the 11 Senators who make up the committee. But none of them spends full time on the investigation. Miller does. He also has hired and now supervises the 110-person staff which carries out the day-to-day work of the committee. He presides over a high-powered task force of professional investigators, veterans of the Watergate probe, systems analysts, a former ambassador and CIA station chief, academics, and some aggressive young lawyers headed by Frederick A. O. Schwarz, toy-fortune heir. As a group, they have a license to dig deeper into this country's official secrets than any other "outsiders" in history.

Big role

So Bill Miller, who earns $36,000 a year, probably knows as much about American spying as anyone not in the espionage trade. More important, as a major writer of the committee's final report and recommendations, he'll have considerable say over what sort of CIA and FBI the U.S. will be left with after the present controversy runs its course.

Miller is a stern critic of the intelligence community, but he does not see himself as out to get the CIA.

"We're really interested in returning to the notion that the intelligence agencies are going to operate under the Constitution and the law," he says. "In the area of intelligence, we're dealing with the operations of vital and powerful government agencies whose purpose is to defend the country. But because they have to operate in secrecy, they pose a great threat to an open society and to individual liberties."

Miller is outraged by many of the abuses that have come to light, especially the illegal spying by the FBI and CIA on U.S. citizens who opposed the war in Vietnam—as Miller himself did (he quit the State Department in protest against the war and became a Congressional staffer in 1967). But he is sympathetic to many of the career intelligence officers who now find themselves under attack or in disgrace.

"You've got people who served their country honorably for 25 or 30 years and who are now faced with the stigma of things they thought they were doing in a patriotic spirit. They're being criticized by people who used to approve of what they were doing. I find that very moving. It's something that tempers the initial criticisms. While there's no question that some spying activities have hurt the country, a way has to be found to sort the problem out without tearing these agencies to bits.

Two-sided job

"It's a hard thing to do," he concedes. "We're both investigating these agencies and cooperating with them. We're calling everything they do into question and at the same time trying to restore and rebuild them, and inspire confidence in the very necessary work they do.

continued

William G. Miller (r), director of the 110-member staff in the Senate investigation of U.S. intelligence agencies, will help write the final report. Here he works with Sen. Frank Church, committee chairman. Miller typifies the growing importance of knowledgeable Congressional aides.

MILLER *CONTINUED*

"That's really the basic purpose of our committee—to give a new legitimacy through statutory charter to these agencies and to try to rid them of the abuses that have become so evident."

For all its importance, Bill Miller's role is scarcely acknowledged outside the stuffy, windowless converted auditorium in a Senate office building that serves as headquarters for the committee staff. By definition a Congressional aide is supposed to keep a low profile. Generally, a staffer is seen whispering in the ear of his boss, the Senator or Congressman, but not heard publicly — especially if his boss is a would-be Presidential candidate. Miller's boss is Committee Chairman Frank Church (D., Idaho), who may well declare for the Presidency next year when the committee finishes its work. It was only after persistent requests from PARADE, and permission from Church himself, that Miller agreed to be interviewed.

Miller is accustomed to giving his all in campaigns labeled with other, better-known names. For five years he was foreign policy and defense adviser to the former Republican Senator from Kentucky, John Sherman Cooper, now U.S. ambassador to East Germany. During the Johnson and Nixon Administrations, Cooper waged a frustrating but eventually effective fight in the Senate to limit this country's Anti-ballistic Missile (ABM) system.

The key Senate staffer behind Cooper's four-year struggle was Bill Miller. "Partly as a result of that battle," he says, "the Senate has become relatively fearless now. The Senators are no longer afraid to question Administration proposals they don't understand. They demand that defense systems be explained to them. They won't dismiss them as too complicated and just summarily approve them anymore. It was marvelous to see Senator Cooper, then a man in his 60's, still willing to sit down and learn things that were hard for him. It was a great act of courage on his part."

His next job

After Cooper's retirement from the Senate in 1972, Miller became staff director of the little-known but important Senate Committee on the Termination of the National Emergency, which has produced a bill that would strengthen Congress' checks and balances on the President's power to declare a national emergency. The bill should come to a vote later this year.

Miller believes that the four major problems he has tackled—Vietnam, the ABM, national emergencies and now the CIA-FBI abuses—are really one problem: "These issues all arose because the legislature granted to the executive enormous powers that it should have retained and been responsible for itself. There are vast areas, particularly involving national security and foreign policy, where the Administration's actions aren't even recorded for review by the Congress, to say nothing of availability to public scrutiny. This is clearly a great danger."

Miller with wife Suzanne and sons Christopher and William. A heavy schedule makes it hard for him to find time at home, but whenever possible they read aloud to each other at night.

Miller knows about the power of the executive branch because he has worked on that side of the government, too. Before quitting the State Department over Vietnam, he was a foreign service officer in the Middle East and North Africa. His two sons, William, 15, and Christopher, 11, were born in Iran, where Miller and his wife Suzanne were stationed for five years. Now, with the Intelligence Committee taking up so much of his energy, Miller finds it hard, but not impossible, to spend time with his family. The Millers make a point of not owning a TV set. Whenever possible, they read aloud to each other in the evenings. Miller also writes poetry.

Miller's colleagues on the committee find him admirable but puzzling. "Bill doesn't have driving personal ambition like so many people on the Hill," says Pat Shea, a lawyer on the staff. "He doesn't engage in strong-arm tactics or pressure plays. He's not cynical and he's never dictatorial. What's more, he's a generalist; he's not just an expert at drafting bills. His education at Williams College, Oxford and Harvard was in history, literature and philosophy. From his time in the State Department, he knows how the executive branch works and can provide an overview of the situation. He's one of the few people I've come to admire more after working with him than before."

Run for office?

What will Bill Miller do next February or March when the work of the Intelligence Committee is done? Run for office, perhaps?

"I've thought about it in the past," he answers, "but I really don't have a base. You have to be a part of a community for a long time first to do a good job and second to get elected."

Would he like to head the CIA? Miller laughs: "I don't think so. I really prefer a more open life. I like to talk about my work. Even my present job creates strains for my family and friends because I can't talk about many of the ideas and much of the information I'm working with. I have to be careful about every word I say if it has anything to do with the work of the committee. It's a discipline I really don't enjoy."

Does he think of himself as a free-lance public statesman, a problem-solver for hire? He shrugs off that definition:

"I don't consider myself that. I've thought of everything I've done as an apprenticeship. I'm still learning a lot. I haven't really thought much about what I'm going to do next. I suppose I should."

His boss, Sen. Frank Church, who thinks a lot about the future these days, says of Miller, "He's a senior staff man of splendid reputation, which is like being a senior Senator in a way. He's in a position to make a career of it."